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North Korea's Long-Range Missile Test

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On July 4, 2017, North Korea tested a long-range ballistic missile that some observers characterized as having intercontinental range. If so, it represents reaching a milestone years earlier than many analysts predicted. The two-stage missile reportedly flew in a high trajectory for 37 minutes, demonstrating a theoretical range that could include Alaska. It is not known what payload was used, but the actual range using a nuclear warhead would likely be significantly shorter. Although North Korea has not proven the capability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead or develop a reentry vehicle that could survive reentering the atmosphere, the test represented an advance that could threaten the United States. The test was timed to coincide with the July 4th holiday, as well as to respond to last week's summit between President Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. President Trump's tweets following the launch suggested that he would further pressure Beijing to rein in North Korea this week when he meets with China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin at the Group of Twenty (G-20) summit.

Since Trump took office, his policy on North Korea appears to have hardened, particularly following the release and subsequent death of Otto Wambier in June, a U.S. college student who had been held in North Korea for 17 months. Last week the Treasury Department announced actions to intensify pressure on North Korea, including sanctions against a Chinese shipping company and a Chinese bank accused of facilitating Pyongyang's illicit activities. During his press conference with Moon, Trump called North Korea a "reckless and brutal regime" and indicated no willingness to engage in diplomacy with Pyongyang. Moon, elected in May, has advocated for a balance of pressure and engagement with North Korea, including pursuing more inter-Korean economic cooperation projects. However, immediately following the launch, the U.S. and South Korean militaries embarked on previously unscheduled military exercises that included firing precision-strike missiles that could target much of North Korea. These exercises could indicate convergence of Washington and Seoul's approaches.

Following the test, China and Russia issued a joint statement reiterating their past proposal for a "dual suspension:" the United States and South Korea halt military exercises in exchange for a freeze of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Many observers see that proposal as unlikely to move forward. With leaders scheduled to attend the G-20 summit, following an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC), a stark diplomatic divide could develop with China and Russia on one side, and the United States, South Korea, and Japan on the other.

North Korea's advancing capabilities underscore the limitations of two decades of policy aimed at stopping the regime's nuclear weapons and missile programs. Unilateral U.S. economic sanctions, imposed since the end of the Korean War in 1953, and incrementally increasing sanctions imposed by the UNSC since 2006 have failed to halt Pyongyang's military drive. The regime also appears to be undeterred despite the threat—both explicit and unspoken—of a possible military strike. Multiple rounds of diplomacy in years past—mostly through the Six-Party Talks among the United States, China, South Korea, North Korea, Japan, and Russia—also have broken down.

Going Forward

Observers are discussing redoubled efforts for diplomatic engagement, increased economic pressure, or military intervention. Most of these options have been explored in varying degrees after North Korea's previous provocations.

Diplomatic Engagement

An effort to coordinate diplomacy may involve restarting the Six-Party Talks and drawing Pyongyang back to negotiations. An alternative could be direct bilateral talks with North Korea: Trump has appeared open to the idea, saying he would "honored" to meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un "under the right circumstances." Convening powers in the region to entice North Korea into a deal would necessitate more policy coordination with allies. This could prove difficult for the United States as U.S. ambassadorships to Japan and South Korea remain vacant, and the President has yet to nominate a permanent Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

Increased Pressure

Secretary of State Tillerson has called for "global action" to stop North Korea's threat, specifically citing countries that host overseas North Korean workers or fail to implement UNSC sanctions. China—North Korea's primary trade partner—is often singled out for its ineffectual enforcement. U.N. member states could improve implementation by imposing economic restrictions on individuals, entities, and networks for sanctions violations identified by the U.N. Panel of Experts. Other "pressure" levers include a renewed emphasis on interdiction of illicit goods in commercial trade.

Unilaterally, the United States could impose restrictions ("secondary sanctions") on states—and their entities—that fail to fully implement UNSC sanctions. Existing legislation (e.g., P.L. 114-122) authorizes the President to impose restrictions on financial institutions suspected of facilitating illicit activity with North Korea, even if the bulk of an institution's business with North Korea is legal trade. H.R. 1644 (received in the Senate) could strengthen the President's authority to impose secondary sanctions.

Military Options

In the past, the United States has opted not to use military strikes on North Korea due to the threat of a potentially devastating counterattack on South Korea or Japan, and the possibility of creating a humanitarian crisis. Some analysts predict that a strike could escalate into broader conflict and result in perhaps hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties in South Korea and on U.S. military bases. Such a conflict could at a minimum trigger upheaval in the region, may involve armed conflict with China, and could potentially spiral into nuclear warfare. Some offensive options fall short of direct military intervention: using cyber tools to sabotage North Korea's missile tests; upgrading U.S. intelligence resources to clarify North Korea's capabilities and weaknesses; or increasing the flow of information into the country to spread awareness of the regime's abuses. Some analysts have urged Congress to consider approaches to destabilize the regime, while others have counseled against it, in part because the United States may be unprepared or unwilling to engage in remedying the consequences of a possible government collapse.

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